Home Life on Early Ranches of Southwest Texas

CHAPTER XXVIII

Martin Dittmar
Gillespie County

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"SO COLD that the coffee cups froze in the saucers," the old-timers said about the weather on December 11, 1865, the wedding day of Martin Dittmar and Elizabeth Eckert. But the bride and groom smiled and started almost immediately to their cabin home on Beaver Creek, Mason county, Texas.

Although it was a bitter cold journey they were not dismayed. Both of them had been born in Germany and had come to Texas when quite young.

Martin Dittmar was only seven years old when his father, Martin Dittmar, Sr., and his mother and four children—Martin, Jr., Annie Elizabeth, John George, and baby Elizabeth—landed at Indianola in 1845 during the height of the cholera epidemic. Mr. Dittmar became ill almost immediately after they landed. Although Fredericksburg was his destination he thought if he could get as far as New Braunfels he would get better. He was a man of some means, therefore, he could pay for the transportation for his family and himself instead of waiting for transportation to be arranged for by the Society for the Protection of German Immigrants. So they joined the caravan of ox-drawn wagons for New Braunfels. Martin Dittman, Jr., never forgot the trip. The country was so strange to him and to Annie and John. They encountered heavy rains, drove slowly over muddy roads, and sometimes had to wait for the smaller rivers to run down before they could cross.

Finally they arrived in New Braunfels, but Mr. Dittmar had become weaker. Soon he passed away, and Mrs. Dittmar was left in a strange pioneer country with her four fatherless children. She decided to go on to Fredericksburg according to their original plan. She found Fredericksburg in the throes of a terrible epidemic. Soon baby Elizabeth joined her father.

Naturally Martin had to assume heavy responsibility while very young. He did all that he could to relieve his mother of the heavy work in their little home and on the ten-acre plot allotted to them.

While there was a school in Fredericksburg, Martin had an opportunity to attend school near Cherry Springs. He lived in the home of Reverend Rode, who was the school teacher and also a Methodist preacher. Although Mrs. Dittmar disliked for him to be away from home she was thankful for this opportunity for him. Rev. Rode and his wife loved him and treated him almost as their own child. While Martin had been deprived of the advice of his own father he did have the council and guidance of a noble man. He continued to work for Rev. Rode several years. Rev. Rode paid him some money, but mostly in cattle. The greater part of the cash went for the support of his mother and Annie and John.

When the Civil War began, Martin was employed by the Government to haul supplies from Indianola to the frontier forts. He was also a scout. It was probably on one of these trips he met Elizabeth Eckert of Mason county. As soon as possible after the war was over they were married.

"Following the Cattle Home"

Martin Dittmar moved his cattle from Rev. Rode's to his new home on Beaver Creek. But they would always drift back to their old range.

"The cattle just wouldn't stay on Beaver Creek, so I decided we had better move back with them," laughed Martin Dittmar.

The Dittmars leased a place at first. In 1868 they bought 110 acres of land on the old "Emigrant Road" which ran from San Antonio to El Paso.

During the time they lived on the leased place Mr. Dittmar spent every spare moment on his own land clearing and building a house. One day just after he had returned home a band of Indians passed over the newly cleared land and made a raid on a nearby settlement.

But on the whole the early settlers in the colony had very little trouble with the Indians. This was probably due to a treaty made between von Meusebach, the manager of the colony, and the Comanches. He gave the chiefs and their squaws about 1,000 presents, or their equivalent in money. According to the terms of that treaty the twenty Comanche chiefs promised not to molest the German settlers, and to also report to him when other savage tribes planned to attack them. The Indians were allowed to come into the German settlement whenever they wished. They respected von Meusebach; *"El Sol Colorado"* they called him because of long thick flowing reddish beard.

Finally Mr. and Mrs. Dittmar moved into their own home. The little one-room log cabin was on their own land! The home-made bedstead and table, the bench made of split log, hand-hewn, the trundle bed and cradle both of which were home-made was theirs!

While Mr. Dittmar was busy clearing his land and caring for the cattle, Mrs. Dittmar was equally as busy caring for the house and tending the children. Each bed consisted of a mattress filled with shucks and a huge feather bed, and enormous feather pillows. When the mattress became knotty the shucks were changed. A flock of geese was one of her prized possessions. She "picked" them regularly and saved the feathers to make new feather beds or pillows when needed.

The room with its clean log walls, neatly swept dirt floor and cheerful fire glowing in the huge fireplace, and the children playing happily about, caused Martin Dittmar to forget the many hardships of the Reconstruction period. On a cold night the odor of sweet potatoes roasting in the hot ashes, and the aroma of the meat cooking in the huge covered skillet were surety to him and the children that a good supper fit for a king awaited them.

Money was scarce. The family was increasing. Carl, the first child to arrive had a layette of very few garments, only four of which being new. Two of them were little undershirts. While each new baby was an added ray of sunshine it increased the financial difficulties.

Mr. Dittmar had secured a start of sheep by raising some on shares, the boys doing the herding, but his flock was not yet large enough to yield a material cash return. His cattle were increasing, but no market had been developed. To help make ends meet he decided to haul supplies again to the frontier forts. He would make the trip to Indianola to secure supplies, traveling very slowly because the grass was better in that section. By giving the ox team plenty of time to graze they gained in strength and in weight. He would be gone six weeks to three months on these lonely trips. Although Mrs. Dittmar cooked some food for him to take he had to do most of his own cooking. He took a supply of bacon with him. He was not interested in hunting or fishing for sport, but he shot a deer or antelope, or caught fish for food, when he needed it. He made up his bread in the morning, let it rise while driving during the day, and baked it at night.

Mrs. Dittmar remained at home with her children and kept things going while Mr. Dittmar was away. The garden,

Mr. and Mrs. Martin Dittmar and youngest daughter, Selma.

Home of Mr. and Mrs. Martin Dittmar. Shown at the gate are Otto, Albert and Mathilde Dittmar and a few guests.

chickens and stock had to be cared for. Much of the water had to be hauled from the creek, and when the nearby spring became dry all of it had to be hauled. Sometimes she did her washing at the creek in order to save time.

The wheat had to be taken to Lang's Mill to be ground into flour. The garden had to be worked, the chickens and cattle cared for.

The children enjoyed the evenings after supper when Mrs. Dittmar read to them or told stories. She was fond of poetry and made up rhymes for their pleasure and entertainment.

Always she kept a watchful eye on the children for fear the Indians might steal one of them, but she was frightened only once. Carl came running in one day from where he had been herding the sheep and said a man—an Indian he thought—pulled a gun on him.

As the family grew larger another log room was built about twenty feet from the old one with a roof connecting the two rooms. The two open ends were then "rocked up." The family thus became the proud occupants of three rooms.

In the meantime Mr. Dittmar and the boys were busy caring for the rapidly increasing sheep, the main cash crop. He marketed his wool in Austin or in Burnet. When the railroad came to Llano and Kerrville he had a nearer market. By that time his sheep had grown until he used Mexican herders. One year the price of wool was too low, he thought, so he held it over until the next. Then, when he did sell, it required sixteen two-team wagons to haul the wool to market.

He raised some wheat, devoted much of his time to the sheep industry and looked forward to the time when he would have a large herd of cattle.

Mr. and Mrs. Dittmar believed in living at home. During the summer months she and the girls were busy putting up food for the winter months. They brined cabbage, turnips and green beans and packed them down in large stone jars. The children were especially fond of the turnips which were placed in stone jars—a layer of turnips and a layer of salt.

The calves were allowed to have most of the milk, but in the spring, usually in May, there was usually enough milk to provide butter for the family with some to spare. Mrs. Dittmar would pat the surplus butter into round balls, wrap them neatly with a clean white cloth and pack them into stone jars and cover them with brine. The brine could be soaked out when needed during the winter.

Mrs. Dittmar dried corn by cutting it off close to the cob and spreading it on a sheet stretched on the roof of the house. Peaches were sometimes dried in the sun, and sometimes dried in an oven. For this purpose they built a little room with a chimney in one end of it. A crate or large flat pan was placed on a layer of rocks in such a way that the heat would pass under it.

The family was fond of the dried or jerked beef, but Mrs. Dittmar nearly always put some beef and venison down in brine because the children liked it so much. She would make a brine strong enough to "float an egg" to which she would add a little saltpeter.

The children's favorite dish was meat balls and noodles. The meat balls were made by boiling brined beef or venison until tender, then grinding it in a food grinder, and adding pepper, onions, just enough milk and flour to make it soft enough to make into balls. These meat balls were then dropped into hot fat and fried until brown.

They raised cane from which syrup was made. "Bees goes in front of the white man" is an old saying but it was true in the case of the early settlers of Gillespie county. When the wild bees swarmed, the Dittmars cut the logs and took them into their home-made hives. These hives were rather small and consisted of a home-made rice straw rope held together with very thin wooden slats. They were round at the bottom with a cone shaped top. Later they bought bee hives.

Religion was an important factor in the Dittmar family life. They were members of the Lutheran Church and attended Sunday school, church and mid-week prayer meeting in the home of Rev. Rode where the children also attended school. Religion did not mean to them just a Sunday observance, but it was something from which they received spiritual strength every day in the week. Their sustaining faith was indeed "the substance of things hoped for," and at the end of the day after the ranch work was done, and the supper dishes cleared away, Mr. Dittmar held family prayers. He would read from "Gossmer's Schatzhaestchen's devotional readings," and the entire family sang the song that was printed at the close of each reading. While Mr. Dittmar led in the family prayers each member of the family participated. And not a member of the family ever sat down at the table until Mr. Dittmar had said grace.

The minister was always a welcome guest in the Dittmar home. He occupied the "buben-stuebchen," or the boys' room.

The Dittmar children thus grew up with a recognition of religion as an important factor in their every-day life.

The people in the community trusted Martin Dittmar. There were no banks. When he marketed his wool he frequently delivered wool for his neighbors, and brought their money back to them. Sometimes he returned with several thousand dollars in his boots. "I always felt better when every dollar was delivered to its owner," Mr. Dittmar declared.

He loved land and good cattle; he was one among the first men in that section

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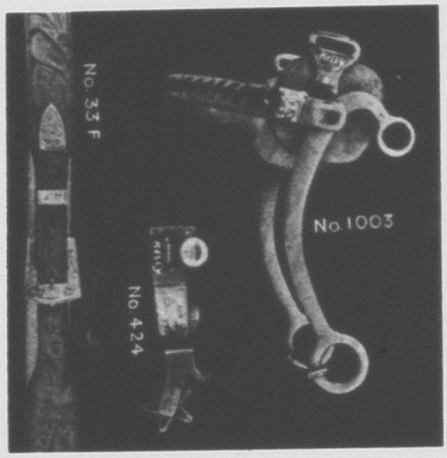

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"I keep sheep and run cattle," was one of his favorite remarks.

And as he grew more prosperous he provided more conveniences for the home. In 1885, 21 years after their wedding, Mr. and Mrs. Dittmar built a big two-story rock house with walls twenty inches thick. It contained eight rooms, a basement and an attic.

Cloth could now be bought in Fredericksburg, but every garment during the early days had to be made by hand. The wool was scoured and spun, and many spare minutes were spent in knitting socks and hose for the family. The girls pieced quilts and did beautiful crochet. They worked by light which glowed from home-made tallow candles, before kerosene lamps were available.

The two older boys and the four older girls were married in the Dittmar home. Some of the younger ones were married in the church nearby. Mr. and Mrs. Dittmar expected the young men who later became sons-in-law in the family to ask their permission to marry their daughters.

"They were sitting very close together in this room," reported one of the sons-in-law, "when I asked for the girl who is now my wife."

"If you two have had an agreement," said Mr. Dittmar, "we won't stand in the way." And after they had given their permission the young men were treated as members of the family, and Mrs. Dittmar was a mother to her daughters-in-law.

As Mr. Dittmar grew older he gradually turned over the responsibility of the ranch to his sons. As long as he was able he rode over the ranch and directed cattle industry. He spent much time in reading religious books, the church paper and a German paper. He died April 5, 1921, and was buried in the family grave yard. Mrs. Dittmar was laid to rest by his side six years later.

She, too, spent much of her later life reading and caring for her flowers, which she had loved all her life. The children always thought she grew the best old fashion carnations, roses and larkspur of any one.

Mr. and Mrs. Dittmar had truly made the best of the opportunities which their parents had provided for them by bringing them to Texas. They did their part in paving the way for the comforts enjoyed by the people in that section of the State today. The children married and settled on nearby ranches. They are highly respected ranchmen and farmers there today. The land Martin Dittmar bought is still owned by members of the family. Albert Dittmar, the youngest son, owns the first farm his father bought, and his family live in the comfortable old, but well kept rock house.

The Dittmar children are: Carl, married Elsie Klett; Adolph, married Lydia Anderegg; Emma, married Otto Lang; Lina, married Jacob Spaeth; Sophie (dead), married Henry Ellebrecht; John, married Hulda Kroll; Louise (dead), married Alfred Sagebiel; Matilda, married Alex Durst; Otto, married Olga Klingelhoefer; Albert, married Amanda Grote; and Selma, married Alfred Sagebiel, her brother-in-law.

Rustlers Come With Livestock In Cotton Belt

ORGANIZATION of an "anti-rustlers" division by the Alabama State Department of Agriculture to fight livestock thieves is a sign of the times in the Cotton Belt as 1940 finds Southern farmers, from coast to coast, turning to livestock as efficient users of land, labor and feed crops. Livestock, farmers in Alabama and other States point out, provide year-round income to supplement cotton from which comes cottonseed products, efficient livestock feeds.

County agents, college animal husbandry leaders, experiment stations and vocational agriculture teachers are among the groups taking the leadership in plans for further development of a sound program of livestock and crop production in the South, reports from all States show.

Supplementing these agencies is the experience of many individual farmers who have proved that livestock belong in a balanced farming program in the Southwest, the Mississippi Valley and the Southeast. As the "fellow across the road" makes a success with livestock, his practices become an important aid and encouragement to neighboring farmers who may be less experienced in raising livestock.

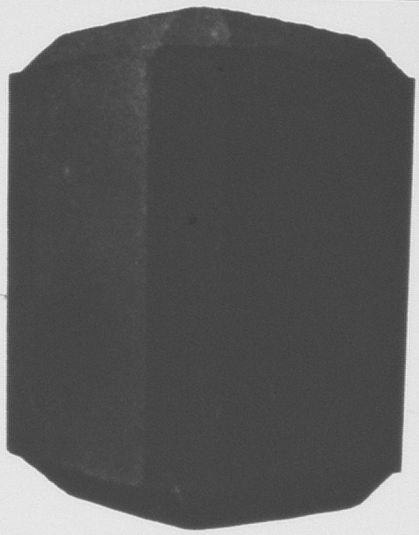
Important in the feeding plans of Southern livestock raisers is the efficient use of increased acreages of pasture, grains and hay crops. Efficient utilization of these feeds in the South is made possible by the local production of cottonseed products, the nation's leading source of protein essential for balanced livestock rations.

While 1940 livestock trends will be influenced by many factors, reports coincide in their evidence that livestock will be an increasing factor in the farming system in all states south of the Mason-Dixon line. Department of Agriculture estimates of Southern livestock numbers at the beginning of 1940, soon to be released, seem likely to show a further gain over the 1939 figures, which totaled 11,500,000 more cattle, hogs, sheep and work stock than ten years ago.

Added to the availability of grains, hays, silage and cottonseed products, and increasing improvement of Southern pastures, advantages for livestock production include mild weather and the availability of labor, utilized only a relatively short time in cotton production, for handling animals throughout the year. Both equipment and care are essential in efficient livestock production, authorities point out, and Southern farmers are in advantageous position to use low-cost equipment and to give care and attention to farm animals.

"Rustlers," even though they add an atmosphere of the Old West to the growth of the Cotton Belt livestock industry, are a minor factor, that will be quickly eliminated, these authorities point out. Far greater in importance, they say, is the recognition by Southern farmers of the value and importance of a balanced program of crop and livestock production, efficiently utilizing the natural and human resources of the South.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the eighth of a series, "Practical Feeding Methods for the Cotton Belt."



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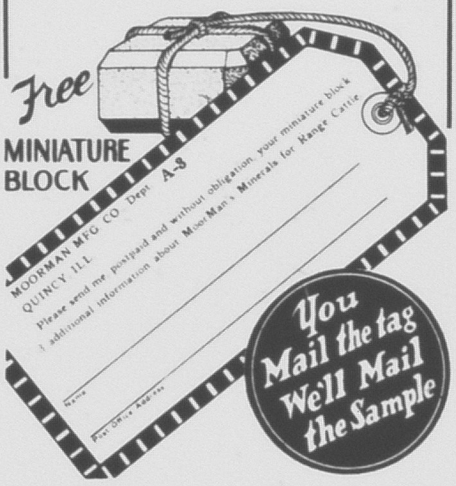
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